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# Louis Paul Boon in the New Era of Television in the 1960s

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Belgium's Nobel Prize candidate for Literature, Louis Paul Boon (1912–1979), regularly appeared on prime time television in the early and mid-sixties. His national fame reached a peak in the 1960s and 1970s. His funeral in 1979 was a national event. This article investigates the turn in appreciation for Boon in the 1960s and the impact television has had on it. The approach draws on literary studies as well as television and media studies in that it approaches the 1960s as a decade in which public life was profoundly changed by the new mass medium which, after a slow start in Belgium, had an impact on public life from the early 1960s onwards, as in most other Western countries. The article examines why and how a turn in appreciation for Boon came about in the 1960s and which role television played in it.

**KEYWORDS** standardized television, (mainstream) television, flow, viewing routines in the 1960s, television's (an)aesthetics, medium (de)sensitization, facial close-up, talking head, reception in the 1960s

## The 'golden sixties' as a turning point

In 2012, Belgium commemorated and celebrated the centenary of the birth of Louis Paul Boon, country's great renewer of the post-war novel. He was perhaps the most extraordinary Nobel Prize candidate Flanders ever had.<sup>1</sup> He wrote a well-known politically motivated diptych on the rise and fall of socialism in Flanders in the nineteenth-century *Chapel Road* (1953) and *Summer in Termuren* (1956).<sup>2</sup> Today, his impact as a political writer and literary innovator has been widely acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> However, Humbeek convincingly argued that the reception of Boon's work was remarkably slow.<sup>4</sup> For some time, Boon's early works (such as the collage novel *My Little War*, from 1946, and

the diptych, from 1953 and 1956 respectively) were thought of as complex, subversive and slightly strange.<sup>5</sup> In fact it was only in 1966 that the young writer and critic Paul de Wispelaere was to make a closer analysis of these two books in 'De structuur van De Kapellekensbaan en Zomer te Ter-Muren' [The structure of Chapel Road and Summer in Termuren] referring to these novels as highly innovative 'engagé novels', 'total novels', 'anti-novels' and 'collage novels'; De Wispelaere now used the very terms which Boon himself had used with great self-irony in his novels in the 1940s and 1950s with distinction, academic clarity and great appreciation.<sup>6</sup> These novels are widely praised as Boon's *magnum opus*.

It has been argued repeatedly (also in De Wispelaere's later work) that the 1960s created a turning point in the appreciation for Boon.<sup>7</sup> This claim was reaffirmed more recently in the year of commemoration 2012 in two exhibitions in honour of Louis Paul Boon in Antwerp and Aalst curated by Humbeek and Kennis. Flemish journalists followed up on this in the newspapers as part of the stir created by the opening of the Boon Year 2012; they commemorated Boon and the 'turn in his fame' in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> This is exemplified by the journalist Frans Hellemans who wrote in *Knack* about Boon's television appearances in the 1960s as having changed the lives of Boon and his wife Jeanneke in terms of wealth and fame.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Hellemans suggested that both Boon's work as a newspaper columnist as well as his television work contributed to his broader fame in what Hellemans labelled as 'the golden sixties'. Drawing from standard publications on Boon as well as autobiographical and biographical sources presented at the two exhibitions on Boon's life, Hellemans wrote:

After the poor public successes in the 1950s, Boon unmistakably choose a more certain route to fame and became the editor for culture and literature of the socialist newspaper *Vooruit*. As such, he wrote 'colloquial' newspaper prose that was well received indeed. Now, he was mostly read for the wittiness of his Boontje-column. His quickly growing fame, together with the introduction of the paperback and on top of it his tasty [gesmaakte] public appearances in the popular TV quiz '*t Is maar een woord* [It's just a word] since late 1962, launched the Boon BV *avant la lettre*. Finally, he could cash in on his *renomme* as Flemish author.<sup>10</sup>

Note that Hellemans not only mentioned the impact of television on his regular readers but also the popularity of Boon's newspaper columns as well as the general public's broader appreciation for and growing familiarity with Boon as a 'renowned Flemish author' appearing regularly on prime time television. It should also be noted that Hellemans' words on Boon's fame since the 'golden sixties' in part reiterated Humbeek's earlier observations presented at the exhibitions and drawing from his publications from the late 1980s onwards. One of Humbeek's observations was that Boon's death (in 1979) and funeral (which reverberated throughout the Low Countries and specifically in his hometown Aalst, where mourners flocked together on the streets for a public farewell to the writer) had apparently made the general audience forget that they had once despised Boon. Yet at the high point of his fame in the 1970s, Boon himself never really forgot how the lack of acknowledgement and money had plagued him and his wife in the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Humbeek also argued that Boon's belated recognition was perfectly re-enacted and

played out by Boon in the 1970s, for instance by ‘recycling’ the earlier misunderstandings surrounding his work and making fun of those critics who had portrayed him, the self-acclaimed ‘seismographer’ of a sick world, as a sick person. In an attempt to amuse himself if not his readers, Boon gladly posed as an ‘*arrivé* writer’ when fame finally came to him in the 1960s and 1970s. He repeatedly provoked and teased his honourable critics by posing as a former communist aka *viezentist* [pornographer], who could afford a sports car for his wife Jeanneke, who drove him anywhere, so that he, the retired, formerly *engagé* writer, could comfortably retreat to a decent bungalow in his own ‘private reserve’ in Erembodegem (close to his home town Aalst), staying safely outside of national politics and enjoying everyday life with his family as a typically uncritical modern consumer.<sup>12</sup>

Other Boon scholars have also argued for a turn in Boon’s fame in the sixties, in part along the same lines as Humbeeck. For example, Jos Muyres reconstructed the genesis and reception of Boon’s diptych in his study *Moderniseren en conformeren* (2000) and argued that the two novels generated an income for the writer only from the mid-sixties onwards. Moreover, Muyres argued that Boon’s (relatively late) success should not be understood as a purely literary success, as Boon’s growing success and income in the 1960s partly stemmed from his fame as a television figure.<sup>13</sup> In other words: several factors seem to have played a role in the process, Boon’s growing fame in the 1960s as a TV personality among them; the new mass medium introduced Boon to a broad audience. Muyres suggests that this possibly affected some of the critics, who thought of him more favourably in the 1970s than they had done in the 1950s. Symptomatic of such a turn in appreciation, according to Muyres, was a sudden shift made by the acclaimed literary critic Kees Fens. Remarkably, in 1972, Fens labelled *Chapel Road* as ‘one of the very few truly great novels in Dutch literature.’ However, when *Zomer te Ter-Muren* [Summer in Termuren] was published in 1956, Fens had written that this book was ‘even more chaotic’ than *De Kapellekensbaan* [Chapel Road, published 3 years earlier]; moreover, that Boon ‘simply vomits his thoughts and his feelings’ and that the reader ‘at the end of the book and after a lot of yawning is left in complete chaos [...]. And with one big question: what on earth does Louis Paul Boon want with all this?’<sup>14</sup>

The question to be addressed in this article is: what was the role of television in the turn in Boon’s success in the 1960s as indicated by the scholars and journalists just cited here? My objective is to examine the marked shift in appreciation for Boon in the 1960s against the background of the rise of television, and to open up a new perspective on Boon’s fame since the 1960s, an era which saw the rise of the new mass medium that is supposed to have affected his career.

Television was a relatively new medium in those days (new in comparison to books, the newspaper, and radio). Television may be assumed to have affected audiences in the 1960s, if only because television, despite its relatively late introduction in Belgium, nevertheless quickly developed the features of a mass medium, also in Flanders, as in the rest of the Western world.<sup>15</sup> As Vito Zagarrio put it, television became ‘the centre of virtually every family on the globe.’<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to assume that the new medium left families in Flanders unaffected.

In this article, I will explore why and how a turn in appreciation for Boon came about in the 1960s and which role television played in it. I will successively (1) briefly investigate the rise of mainstream television in Flanders, drawing from studies in the field of television history in Belgium; (2) discuss the general features of Boon's television performances in the early 1960s; (3) analyse the formal features and effects of mainstream television in general and the effects of Boon's television performances on general audiences in particular. To reconstruct and analyse the era of the 1960s in Belgium in which standardized, mainstream television could develop a certain viewing regime, I will draw from a series of historical studies on Flemish TV such as '25 jaar televisie in Vlaanderen: aanpassing of transformatie van een cultuur?'; *Belgische Radio en Televisie: handboek*, and other works. To analyse the specific features of standardized mainstream television and its effects, I will draw from seminal studies in the field by Raymond Williams, John Ellis, Pierre Sorlin, Marshall McLuhan, Francesco Casetti, Lev Manovich and others.

The role television played in Boon's career is understudied so far. Though many scholars and critics have hinted at television's (perhaps pivotal) role in Boon's career, not much specialized (television or media) research has been done on the topic so far. In part this is due to the simple fact that the disciplinary fields of literary, television and (new) media studies are separate fields of expertise and research. In part it is due to the fact that some authors, critics and scholars well embedded in the field of (high) literature looked down on television as a (mass) medium, and on television fame as a result (I will get back to this at the end of this article). Additionally, existing archival records on Boon's appearances on television are rather poor in terms of numbers and disappointing in terms of their audio-visual quality. Generally speaking, television did not systematically record its programmes in the early days of television, and television programmes were poorly preserved in the early days of the medium as there existed a lack of technological know-how with regard to preservation; moreover, the medium was not yet perceived as an important historiographical source of information. Lastly, there has been relatively little interest in Boon's TV work in the field of Boon studies. Fortunately, however, television material featuring Boon is available and some of it is easily accessible today via YouTube.

## Boon and the new era of television in Belgium

In Belgium, public broadcasting started relatively late, in 1953. Television sets were expensive at that point in time, but in Belgium broadcasting and broadcasting facilities were even more expensive than in the surrounding countries as Belgian television had to be adjusted to properly transmit and receive both the Dutch and French languages.<sup>17</sup> The language situation did not only bring about technological difficulties, but also political and economic ones. Language issues in Belgium were a sensitive matter that was once more accentuated by the arrival of this new, telecommunications medium. The Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, Flanders, feared the influence of its surrounding countries, reasoning that, once broadcasting was made possible and television sets were disseminated all over the country, all citizens would be able to receive whatever signal was broadcasted by their neighbouring countries. In other words, one feared the influence of the

national broadcasters in France as well as in the Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> These fears delayed the introduction of television in Belgium. However, when broadcasting started in Belgium, television quickly developed into a popular medium, as in the surrounding countries. Boon's son Jo recalled only recently that his parents already had a television set in 1953 or 1954, which indeed is very early compared to many other families in Flanders as broadcasting only started in Belgium in 1953.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps even more striking is the fact that Boon already appeared on television for the first time on 16 September 1955 in a programme on books and literature, *Vergeet niet te lezen* [Do not forget to read]. It must be noted that this was even before most families in Flanders (as in most parts of the rest of the world) even possessed a television set, and there is no good reason to assume that this early appearance on national television would have affected a broad audience. However, when Boon started to appear on television more regularly, from February 1962 onwards, the medium had grown into a mass medium, and Dutch-spoken Flemish television reached the majority of the Flemish households.<sup>20</sup>

Contrary to most authors, Louis Paul Boon had a keen interest in TV from quite early on, as his son indicated.<sup>21</sup> Although Boon was more ambivalent towards the medium later in his life as will be discussed at the end of this article, he had an initial fascination for the medium and its impact in the earlier days. Over the decades, he clearly showed an interest in all sorts of television-related topics in his journalistic writing and in his novels, among them his *Onkruidromans* [Tumbleweed novels] and his novel on Annie Mols. However, it must be noted that some of his later notes on television are rather dystopian; however, utopian notes are to be found in his column in *Vooruit*.<sup>22</sup> His initial interest in the medium suggest that for Boon, who had worked as a journalist for so long, the step from written journalism to news on television and to the 'lighter' genres on television (entertainment, amusement, quiz) was smaller than for most literary authors, many of whom kept a distance to the new medium as will be discussed below.

### ***Boon's regular appearances on prime-time television***

Boon regularly appeared on prime-time television in the popular television show '*t is maar een woord* [It's just a word] broadcasted nationwide by the Belgian national television (BRT) from 1962 onwards.<sup>23</sup> The format of the show was that of a game show or quiz, which involved answering questions and solving puzzles with language as their main focus. The contributions to the quiz made by Boon were purely language oriented. Normally, the panel members, Boon amongst them, would have to guess the meaning of some extraordinary word or unusual phrasing. In doing so, they presented almost completely scripted, pre-prepared speeches, providing funny *fake* meanings for rare words such as 'eimat' or 'instuif' or 'huilebalk'.<sup>24</sup> As Hellemans wrote recently, the panel members Gaston Durnez, Louis Paul Boon, Piet Theys and Nora Snyers 'had to provide the witty one-liners'.<sup>25</sup> Boon's participation and presence in this show were notable. He spoke a relatively slow, well-articulated Dutch with a high-pitched voice.<sup>26</sup> His role was to make the audience laugh and he often succeeded quite well in this. One of the former panel members, Gaston Durnez, recalled their boyish behaviour.

‘We made silly jokes, told a lot of nonsense and turned things into a caricature both in word and image.’<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Boon and the other writers on the show were not invited for heavy-handed reflections on literature or politics, but for entertainment reasons only, to present some puns and light-hearted fun typical for the genre; similar quizzes with popular writers such as Godfried Bomans were broadcasted in the early years of television in the Netherlands, on prime time and with success.<sup>28</sup>

However innocent ‘language’ as the topic of a television show may sound today, in retrospect this was a clever choice of subject: it helped nations to address sensitivities with regard to preferred, privileged and standard languages, addressing educated and uneducated, standard and non-standard language users in one go, as television could. Note once again that language was a topic that easily touched upon sensitivities in viewers in the 1950s and 1960s. This certainly was the case in the Netherlands, in which very different regional languages were spoken in the eleven provinces of the country. It definitely was the case in Flanders that had struggled with the dominance of French in education and public life for so long. In general, language was an issue in the early days of television, if only because television now constantly presented examples of standard language use as a privileged tongue to all the households in the country — and often in clear contrast to the family’s own private use of regional, colloquial and vernacular languages.

### ***Mainstream television as a creator of fame or Boontje as a ‘talking head’ in the heyday of standardized, mainstream television in Flanders***

The show *‘t is maar een word*, first broadcasted in 1962, was one of the first quizzes on Flemish television. When Boon appeared in the show for the first time, he already had some fame as a writer-journalist and his work appeared in the newspaper very regularly.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he had been appearing on the radio since 1945.<sup>30</sup> In other words, at the beginning of the 1960s, when he started to perform on television, he was already a public voice, but one may well argue that he was not yet a famous figure or a famous face. This statement should be taken very literally in as far as analyses of television go; television research (by Sorlin and others) has shown that TV is capable of turning people into ‘familiar faces’; it takes only so long before people shown on television are recognized in the streets; this indeed happened to Boon, as he himself testified in *Album Louis Paul Boon*.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, TV effectively turned him into a famous figure amongst the general public in Flanders, as the Flemish broadcaster VRT recently recalled.<sup>32</sup> People started to approach Boon and spontaneously talk to him in the streets or they would visit him in his home in Erembodegem as if he were a family member. It must be noted that this is not just an incidental effect nor is it typical for Flanders or Boon. The same happened to Godfried Bomans; ‘When Godfried died, people felt as if they had lost a close friend,’ as the young Harry Mulisch said, observing the stir that the author’s sudden death created in the Netherlands (in December 1971).<sup>33</sup> The question to be addressed here is: why and how do appearances on television (as opposed to appearances on the radio and in the newspapers) affect a broad range of viewers so notably and apparently so quickly and easily?



First of all it must be noted that for television to become a proper medium and even a mass medium that reaches large audiences, a lot more was needed than the mere technical device which was invented decades earlier; whereas the material device had been around since the 1930s, mainstream television was only created in Belgium in the 1950s (roughly as in other countries). To be able to successfully broadcast, producers needed national broadcasting laws and regulations in place allowing them to broadcast nation-wide. Moreover, the new medium needed some sensational events to attract the attention of large numbers of people. (World-wide, the walks on the moon, Kennedy's death and Marilyn Monroe's sex appeal did the trick.) Moreover, producers needed a standardized viewing regime in place in the living rooms all over the country (if not the world) to get a grip on the far-away audiences television was looking for. In other words, to create a medium used for repetitive indoor viewing during the evening, standardisation of the programming was needed: to keep the viewers in front of their TV set. Unlike the programming of separate films in the cinema, mainstream television's programming was meant to create that specific sense of 'flow' that kept the viewers watching throughout an evening, only half aware of the end of a programme or its status as a discrete item in its own right. This was crucial to standardized, mainstream television since the late 1950s and in the 1960s, as television scholar Raymond Williams described in his seminal study of 1974.<sup>34</sup> Note that only *mainstream mass television* is discussed here, and not later forms of television such as post-1980s digital and multichannel television, which broke away from standardized television and created very different aesthetic systems and viewing practices.

European publicly-funded television, no less than US commercial television, formatted its programs rigidly from an early stage by using the same logos, set-ups, and prop formats for regular programmes, with minor variations to refresh the format. This does not mean, however, that I would argue that European's continental publicly-funded TV and imported US series, all of which were of course quite rigidly formatted, cherished exactly the same aesthetic. They obviously did not and there were many obvious differences between programmes, broadcasters, and nations. The point here is that forms of standardisation as discussed here (repetitive use of similar logos, set-ups and prop formats) anticipated and invited repetitive indoor viewing during the evenings — and that *in itself* turned television into a device that could turn an otherwise alien object or unknown person into a familiar, household item or person.<sup>35</sup> Most striking, perhaps, is the way in which television succeeded from fairly early on in framing itself as a window to the world. Pragmatically speaking, this meant that television had succeeded in creating a viewing practice, even a viewing routine, in which seemingly 'real-life' watching took place, in which the screen functioned as a mere 'window' to the outside world and the medium itself had become 'transparent'. Moreover, this viewing experience was visually constantly reinforced by showing many kinds of visualized 'windows' which framed all sorts of 'visions' on the world, as film scholar Francesco Casetti observed.<sup>36</sup>

When a quiz such as *'t is maar een woord* appeared on Belgium television in the early 1960s, the show was typically framed according to the formats of standardized television: it framed Boon and the other panel members as if they were sitting in front of a window, from the waist up, in medium shots to close-ups mostly (see Figures 1 and 2).

They were made to look as if they were presenting their vision on the meaning of a word through a window, as if they were talking to their neighbours, the viewers. The individual members of the home audience, sitting close to the screen in an intimate family circle, as was common in those earlier days of television (see Figures 3 and 4), were directly and very regularly addressed in the course of an evening by the anchor persons, the hosts of programmes and the television announcers, starting the evening with their welcoming ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, Good evening’. In the case of *‘t is maar een word*, hosted by Paul Van de Velde, welcoming words were spoken once again by the host, followed by introductions to the location and the panel members on a particular evening. All were sitting behind a table, framed in medium close-up or close-up. They were turned into ‘talking heads’. Most of the introductory talking was typically done in the form of a direct address to the home viewers who were made to feel they were *personally* addressed, as if they were personally present at the event. They were made to laugh with the panel members and the live studio audience. They were made to feel involved in the quiz, part of the game, as they were made to move along with the flow of questions and answers.

Under this pseudo-real-life viewing experience and window-on-the world experience lies a specific set of aesthetic features characteristic for mainstream television’s format. Flemish mainstream television was no exception to this. With regard to the format of mainstream television worldwide, television scholar John Ellis discerned two very interesting features regarded as standard by the early 1960s. The first is the prominence of the sound track. The second is the prominent use of the facial close-up.<sup>37</sup> With regard to the first: mainstream television was known for its emphasis on sound and music to convey meaning and emotion. Sound and music were loud and dominant, certainly in comparison to the cinema of that day. However, sounds were of a rather poor sonic quality, compared to cinema, and this was due to the technical restrictions of the early television sets, also affecting the visuals. In fact, mainstream television used the prominent sound track in part to compensate for the very restricted visual qualities of television in the early days; this included the size of the screen which was about the size of a hand; in today’s terms quite comparable to the size of a tablet or an iPhone screen (see Figure 5). In other words, the screens in those days were tiny compared to television screens today or in comparison to cinema screens in the 1950s and early 1960s, even more so when the famous wide screens were introduced to the cinema to compete with television’s sudden popularity amongst the audience.<sup>38</sup> (Note, once again, that later forms of television such as post-1980s digital and multichannel television use much larger screens, allowing a much higher quality signal, moreover, better sound systems, hence television in the 1990s could break away from the typical make-up of standardized mainstream television, introducing new aesthetic systems and viewing practices for television since.) There was a second and urgent reason for the producers of mainstream television to use sound and music in a dominant way: sound effects were also used to compensate for the lack of focused visual attention of the home viewers which resulted from the domestic practice of watching together in a fully-lit living-room while doing all sorts of other domestic things such as talking, drinking coffee, walking to the kitchen for a snack, etc. The home viewers’ attention was guided back to the screen over and over again by sudden sounds, loud music and live audience laughter.



FIGURE 1 Louis Paul Boon (right) in the television quiz 't is maar een woord.

As to the second: the prominent use of the close-up, as Ellis observed, was really meant to compensate for the lack of detail on the small screen; it led to the use of more rapid editing, and, most notably, an emphasis on the facial close-up. Unlike cinema, where the sparsely used close-up had always been an exceptional device to create a sense of the extraordinary, in television the close-up soon became part of its standard vocabulary.<sup>39</sup> Or, as modern media scholar Marshall McLuhan already noted in the early 1960s, 'technically, TV tends to be a close-up medium. The close-up that in the movie is used for shock is, on TV, a quite casual thing.'<sup>40</sup>

One more reason for the facial close-up to become so popular so soon: on the relatively small traditional television screen (that is, small in relation to the human body, as opposed to the cinema screen, which is large or even gigantic in comparison to the human body), a close-up of a face appears to be just the 'right' size; indeed, the traditional facial close-ups of the 1950s and 1960s roughly corresponded to the real-life size of the human head. It seems to be an under-studied aspect of the close-up in television's history that the first screens were this small, and more or less remained so for some decades. For example, RCA's 1946 630-TS television set, which was by far the most popular model during the post-war years, had a screen size of only 10 inches. This is about the size of a woman's hand (see Figure 5). Moreover, many of the other post-war televisions, such as RCA's 621-TS, were even smaller, at a mere 7 inches diagonally (about the size of a face from chin



FIGURE 2 Panel of the television quiz 't is maar 'n woord with Louis Paul Boon standing.

to forehead).<sup>41</sup> In retrospect, TV sets were relatively small yet rather expensive.<sup>42</sup> These were still the days one cherished the hours one could sit in front of a TV as a family to enjoy its programmes, and neighbouring families were invited in on special occasions if they happened to not yet have a television set of their own. The viewing experience had a touch of the special, yet also of the habitual and even of the 'natural'. In the heyday of 'classic' mainstream television, the small screen was absolutely crucial to the specific (aesthetic) format and to the 'natural' viewing experience it created, in particular because it made the facial close-ups feel natural: the talking heads of mainstream television were approximately life size, and as such well adjusted to our embodied notions of natural human proportions.<sup>43</sup> This apparently simple formal feature helped stabilize, moreover, naturalize the (initially extraordinary) perceptual experience of watching television. Repetitive watching turned it into a viewing experience that could become 'second nature'. Becoming 'second nature' is usually described as a 'mindset, skill, or type of behavior so ingrained through habit or practice that it seems natural, automatic, or without a basis in conscious thought.'<sup>44</sup> Applied to viewers who are familiar with a certain historical viewing practice: they use their automatized viewing routines when



watching television, and as part of their routines they use fully automatized (cognitive) 'templates' and 'schemes' which become second nature in the process. It also means that with time, viewers stop noticing that they are using them.



FIGURE 3 Television viewing in the early 1960s.



FIGURE 4 Television viewing in the 1960s.

All the factors discussed here have helped to turn television into an audio-visual medium that soon was more firmly in the grip of the automatization of viewing habits than most media, since watching television routinely, often for many hours a day, was basic to the viewing experience from the early 1960s onwards. Viewers were made to overlook the technical structure of the medium and of the programmes they watched. Moreover, they were made to overlook the ontological difference between a face on a screen and one in real life.<sup>45</sup> Note also that in those days only an audio-visual medium such as television was able to familiarize a 'face' so quickly. Later 'new media' like the ones of the 1990s and after succeeded in rendering faces familiar even faster, such as when personal (mobile) digital media allow an image to go viral. In the 1960s, however, the power to make a face familiar was a power TV had above all other media, film and newspapers included.<sup>46</sup>

One more aspect is of particular interest here: film and television scholar Pierre Sorlin pointed out that 'television has introduced a tremendous change in our conception, both of the film and the human body, by increasingly using the close-up.' Moreover, he argued that presumably because of the television close-up format, viewers came to accept the 'head' as a *pars pro toto* for the whole body.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the particular screen size, helping 'heads' to look 'natural' and even 'familiar', facilitated the easy acceptance of television celebrities as whole persons who became as familiar as family members. This puts the observation that Boon could be turned into a public figure almost overnight into a very specific theoretical frame: Flemish mainstream television as window-on-the-Flemish-world showed him regularly as a 'talking head' in close-up. Predictably, through a process of repetitive viewing, 'Boon' (in inverted commas, referring to the figure on the screen as opposed to the person in real life) could become a familiar face. The Flemish contemporary home viewers were effectively made to overlook the technical structure of the medium and of the quiz they liked to watch. More specifically, they were made to overlook the ontological difference between the face on the screen and Boon in real life. He became their 'family friend' (as Godfried Bomans had become a 'close friend' to viewers in the Netherlands). It is important to add to this that Boon was not turned into a 'star', as the cinema with its gigantic close-ups would have done; TV does not attribute the quality of 'greatness' to a person on screen in close-up as the cinema does, adding (potential fetish) qualities to the star such as being great and highly admirable but far away and in fact beyond reach, as the word 'star' indicates.<sup>48</sup> 'Boon', on the contrary, was turned into a figure that came quite close to the home viewers.<sup>49</sup> In this way, his appearances on mainstream television made 'Boon' look more reachable, assessable, and acceptable. In other words, the real person, Boon, was effectively '*tele visualised*' in the 1960s: he was turned into a 'talking head' with a familiar face (and voice) in a process which normalized and pacified his idiosyncrasies in the same go. In other words, TV took away some of his 'strangeness'. In effect, he was 'domesticated', as Ellis would put it. A last paragraph will be used to analyse the underlying mechanisms at work in the process of normalization/familiarization/domestication/popularization as discussed here.

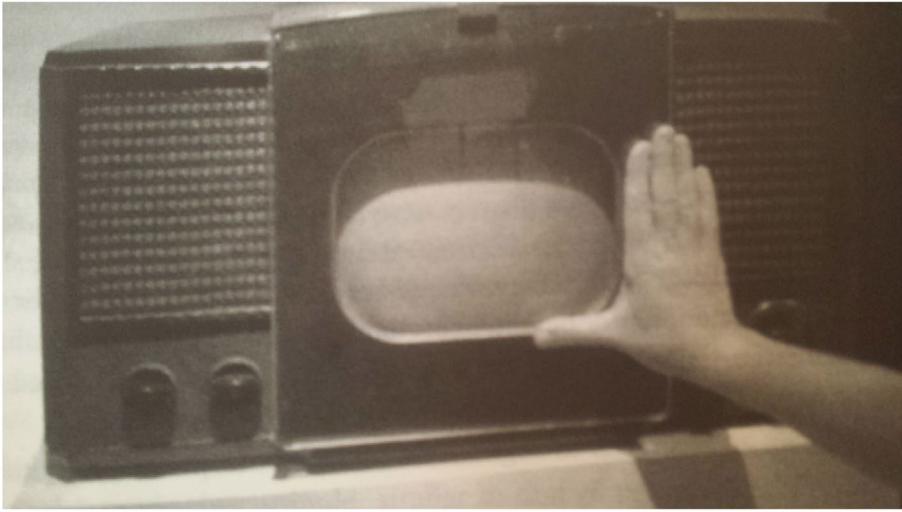


FIGURE 5 RCA's 1946 630-TS television set with a screen size of ten inches diagonally.

### Television as a home device for a psychological 'work-out'

Ellis has pointed out that television as a medium developed a distinctive relationship to time, and one that is distinctly different from most other media: 'Television exists in the same time continuum as its audience: its time is co-present with that of the audience', as John Ellis argued.<sup>50</sup> The sensation of being in the same time frame is reinforced by television's familiar 'talking heads' talking to, looking at and directly *addressing* the viewer (as opposed to cinema, where this was very rarely done, until Jean-Luc Godard and other Nouvelle Vague directors stole the technique from early television and used it in the cinema all of a sudden and mostly as a provocation and a gimmick). Whereas a film's diegetic story time and space exist separately from the viewers' time and space, the television viewer, constantly being addressed directly, was made to feel as if s/he was watching things in real time, as if through a window, as if things were 'really' happening in the real world from which the home viewer momentarily, and comfortably retreated for a few hours in the evening. In this way, Ellis argued, television as a mass medium could 'take the continuous present, the present in which we perceive ourselves as existing, and give it back to us in a formalized set of routines of meaning.'<sup>51</sup> In other words, television viewers stay in the same time continuum *and* they share the experience of being in it together. It is within the same context that Ellis convincingly argued that television as a truly *popular* medium does not have the ambition to 'take us elsewhere', it does not create epiphanies, rather it creates psychological 'work outs' in the safe environment of the home. Television broadcasting does not aim at being aesthetically overwhelming; it does not even try to be perceptually engaging. In contrast, cinema audiences, much like visitors to a museum, are offered special forms of perceptual engagement, organized outside of their homes (one speaks of 'going out to the cinema'). Television viewers — especially those viewers who watched their weekly quizzes — had a very different mind-set: they

expected to see the mundane. Television, as Ellis put it, is ‘secular rather than sacred,’ as it ‘accompanies you through life, it does not take you to another dimension.’<sup>52</sup> It is a (mass) medium that is uninterested in creating an epiphany for its viewers; mainstream television is concerned with:

working out, in the specific sense of repeating and working over, gradually giving more and more form, to a fear, to a puzzle, to a problem, until it becomes acceptable: understood in part, rejected in part, repressed in part, misperceived in part, but acknowledged in whole. [...] Through television, then, the tensions of the outside world can become domesticated.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, Ellis touches upon a phenomenon which is basic to mainstream television with its repetitive and on-going viewing practice: it became a home device for psychological work-outs — a tool to domesticate the tensions of the outside world; in much the same way as a home trainer provides work-outs for our body, mainstream television provides work-outs on a psychological level. Framed within this context, the choice of topic of ‘*t is maar een woord*’ is quite remarkable: this popular quiz was successfully ‘working over’ all sorts of tensions related to language issues in all sorts of familiar, silly and innocent ways. This was done in a country that had been touched by a fierce language struggle which left deep traces in the country’s history and culture. Typically, the mundane aesthetic format of the programme — an apparently simple ‘window-to-the-world’ with some ‘talking heads’ discussing the meaning of words — never really changed as it functioned effectively within the constraints of mainstream television’s aesthetic. The programme’s aesthetic is best described in terms of *anaesthetics*, as it effectively *de*-sensitized its viewers to the formal properties of the medium (e.g. the size of the screen, the low quality of the signal; the way people were framed in medium shots and close-ups).<sup>54</sup> As such, ‘*t is maar een woord*’, with its familiar faces and predictable topics, was at the heart of a weekly, national ‘work-out’ provided by the BRT.

## Responses in the field of literature

In light of the processes and mechanism discussed here — that is, mainstream television’s potential to desensitize its viewers to the medium, and familiarize and naturalize whatever is on show regularly — one may wonder how Boon’s television fame affected his specific authority as a newspaper man at *Vooruit* (see Figure 6), an engaged political writer and a literary innovator in the long run. Some scholars and critics have pointed out that Boon’s television appearances cost him some esteem from his colleagues in the field of literature. Note that we are now discussing observations by experts in the field of literature on the responses by other experts, and not the general responses amongst a broader audience of regular television viewers. Symptomatic for a negative evaluation of Boon’s television appearances by other writers in Flanders are the words, uttered by Leo Pleysier:

Initially, I thought of Louis Paul Boon as nothing more than a frivolous figure, who would, as a TV quiz panelist in the ‘60s, deliver silly jokes with a squeaking and unpleasant voice. For me, those appearances on television had for long barricaded the doors to his literary work.





FIGURE 6 Louis Paul Boon as newspaper editor at *Vooruit*. *Album Louis Paul Boon. Een leven in woord en beeld*. Courtesy Louis Paul Boon Documentatiecentrum, University of Antwerp, Belgium. uit *Album Louis Paul Boon*, 2008.

And yet I had to conclude in retrospect while reading his work that he was a writer who had succeeded to mix his work and his natural merit like no one before him.<sup>55</sup>

Pleysier, born in 1945, was about seventeen when he saw Boon on prime time television. Today he admires the special merits of the writer. In retrospect, however, he feels that television turned Boon into ‘nothing more’ than a ‘frivolous figure’ presenting ‘silly jokes’ with an ‘unpleasant voice’. In other words, Pleysier felt that television had demystified the writer full of special merits which no author before him had shown so clearly in his literary work. Though the broader audience of television viewers readily accepted the writer in his ‘frivolous’ role, Boon’s friends and colleagues in the field of literature had more of a hard time accepting him in that role. How to understand the negative responses to his TV appearances amongst his literary friends? For one, his role on prime time television as a ‘clown’ (Humbeeck) seemed to suggest, at least to his literary friends, that his days as a courageous, subversive, *engagé* writer lay behind him.<sup>56</sup> His friends had a hard time accepting what Ellis would have labelled the ‘domesticated’ version of the great author whom they all had liked and admired once. Perhaps this all can best be explained in the same terms (provided by John Ellis) which helped to explain why other viewers enjoy the ‘workouts’ the mass medium had to offer. For one, it is remarkable that many writers and artists in Boon’s days — as opposed to the broader audience of television viewers discussed above — initially did *not* like television as a new medium, and they were even more hesitant to jump on the bandwagon when television became a mass medium.<sup>57</sup> To understand this, one must keep in mind that in order for television to provide these

workouts effectively, it had to rely on the typical ‘an-aesthetics’ of mainstream television which help to desensitize viewers to its technical and formal properties (and fallacies). In as far as (modernist) writers and artists typically have a sensitive attitude towards art and media, and focus on the specific formal and aesthetic features of a medium as part of their profession, television’s ‘an-aesthetics’ must have disappointed (if not bored) them. Being treated to the repetitive, the real and the mundane almost exclusively, waiting for epiphanies that never came, they were not tempted to hold the medium in high esteem, and this, too, must have affected their esteem for Boon’s role in it. At some point, Boon himself felt that his TV appearances worked against him in his own social circles and that TV possibly made him lose ‘the last bits of dignity’ he had had as a critical writer, as his biographer Kris Humbeeck wrote:

Deep inside the comedian Boon may have felt degraded to a clown by the outside world, someone who, to amuse the general public as well the intellectuals, is presented as an irresistibly charming yet totally pacified former revolutionary.<sup>58</sup>

This, however, seems to have been a temporary effect in the 1960s when he appeared on television more regularly. As he grew to great literary fame in the 1970s and was honoured with several respectable prizes and placed on the list for the Nobel Prize, these negative side effects vanished. The 1970s created a new space for a (late) acceptance of the extraordinary value of his earlier work amongst critics, and specifically so with regard to *Chapel Road*, now generally considered ‘one of the very few truly great novels in Dutch literature’.<sup>59</sup> The days that his uniquely personal ‘Flemish’ style had irritated the critics seemed to lay behind him now.<sup>60</sup> When he died in 1979 he was honoured as one of Belgium’s greatest writers and his funeral was a national event broadcasted on national television.

## Conclusions

An analysis of the mechanisms and processes at work in contemporary mainstream television in Flanders in the 1960s has helped to reframe and understand the shift in acceptance of Boon in the 1960s. It is highly likely that his appearances on television turned ‘Boon’ into a famous and familiar figure known by a broad (television) audience in Flanders from the 1960s onwards. Standard works in the field of television and media studies by Williams, Ellis, Casetti, McLuhan and others helped to frame and analyse the specific mechanisms of mainstream television as an audio-visual medium, moreover a mass medium, well equipped to turn Boon into a familiar face and figure in Flanders in the 1960s. Earlier, his novels and his radio and newspaper work were unable to create this effect so that, 20 years after he started publishing, it was TV which brought him the fame his work, however great, had not generated. In other words, television contributed to his fame in a substantial way. His television appearances must be held responsible for the sudden turn in his fame and success in the ‘golden sixties’ described by scholars as well as journalists. Some negative effects of his TV appearances on his peers in the field of literature in the 1960s were only temporary as he grew to great literary fame and acclaim in the 1970s.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank A. A. Troost for her editorial work as well as E. Bruinsma and S. Willemsen for their extensive contributions to the reflections on Boon and television respectively.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On Boon and the Nobel Prize, see Humbeek, *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka*. Witte, J. de (E. Bruinsma, ed.), 'Met de hoge hoed op naar Zweden', in *De kantieke schoolmeester* 6/7, ed. by E. Bruinsma, K. Humbeek and H. Polis (Antwerpen 1994), pp. 578–590.

<sup>2</sup> L. P. Boon, *De Kapellekensbaan. Roman*. De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1953 (An early translation in English under the title *Chapel Road* was published by Twayne Publishers, New York 1972); and Louis Paul Boon, *Zomer te Ter-Muren. Het 2<sup>de</sup> boek over de Kapellekensbaan*. De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1956. (Louis Paul Boon, *Summer in Termuren. A novel*. Dalkey Archive, London 2006). Many of Boon's novels translated by Paul Vincent are published by Dalkey Archive Press. See also Boon's small novel on the Great War, *My Little War* (1946), published in a new English translation by Dalkey only recently.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete reconstruction of the development and reception of Boon's work since the 1940s up till this day, see Humbeek and other scholars (Paul de Wispelaere, Bert Vanheste, Theo D'haen, Ernst Bruinsma, Annie van den Oever and others) who regularly published on the topic. Special issues of *De kantieke schoolmeester* presented analyses of the reception of Boon's successive novels from the early 1990s onwards. More recent analyses of each title are to be found in the respective epilogues published in the successive volumes of the collected edition. An early and polemic attack on 'trends' in the Boon critique was offered by Humbeek in his 'Kleine apocalypse' in 1989. For a full overview of his many publications on Boon, see <http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=kris.humbeek> [accessed April 2012]. For a recent analysis of Boon as a European innovator of the novel, see Van den Oever, *Life Itself*, published by Dalkey Archive, 2008. Note that Paul de Wispelaere already published on the last topic in 1966 (see note 6).

<sup>4</sup> See Humbeek, *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka*, which summarizes part of the earlier analyses of the reception of Boon in the Low Countries.

<sup>5</sup> See also Van den Oever, *Life Itself*.

<sup>6</sup> See De Wispelaere, 'De structuur van De Kapellekensbaan en Zomer te Ter-Muren' (1966).

<sup>7</sup> See Humbeek, *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka*.

<sup>8</sup> Note that Humbeek had quite an impact on Boon's reception in Flanders in the last decades, publishing constantly on Boon since the late 1980s, leaving

unmistakable traces in the way Boon's public 'imago' is perceived of by many journalists in Belgium today. Note that Humbeek is Boon's biographer, the curator of some major exhibitions on his work (with Britt Kennis and others), the head of the Research Centre for the academic study of Louis Paul Boon at the University of Antwerp, the editor of the complete edition of his work (with Ernst Bruinsma and others) and the editor in chief of the former academic journal on Boon, *De kantieke schoolmeester*. His former academic mentor, the literary author and scholar Paul de Wispelaere, preceded him in some of these roles.

<sup>9</sup> There is broader consensus on this point. The term 'golden sixties' with regard to this was coined by Frans Hellemans in *Knack*, commemorating Boon and the turn in his success and fame in the 1960s. See Hellemans, 'De castratie van Louis Paul Boon'; online: <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/boeken/nieuws/de-castratie-van-louis-paul-boon/article-4000060348113.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Hellemans, 'De castratie van Louis Paul Boon'.

<sup>11</sup> Analyses paraphrased here as well as in the newspapers by Flemish journalists draw mostly from Humbeek's analyses founded in biographical source material, presented in *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka* and later publications. See also note 8.

<sup>12</sup> Humbeek, *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka*.

<sup>13</sup> See Muyres, *Moderniseren en conformeren*.

<sup>14</sup> See Fens as commented on by Muyres, *Moderniseren en conformeren*. See also Muyres 'De schrijver en zijn criticus', p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> For remarkable information on this, see *Belgische Radio en Televisie: handboek*. On TV's popularity in the 1960s, see also Zagarrio, 'Theseus and Ariadne: For a Counter-History of the Cinema-Television Relationship?'

<sup>16</sup> Zagarrio, 'Theseus and Ariadne: For a Counter-History of the Cinema-Television Relationship?', p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> See *Belgische Radio en Televisie: handboek*.

<sup>18</sup> See the concerns articulated in the end of the year speech by the Flemish Jan Boon, 31 December 1950; Boon was the director-general of the National Radio Institute (NIR). Zie *Belgische Radio en Televisie: handboek*, p. 108. Voor de speech van Boon, zie: [s. n.], '25 jaar televisie in Vlaanderen', p. 258. Zie tenslotte ook: Casteren, *25 dozijn rode rozen*; en Grossey, *Goedenavond, beste kijkers*.

<sup>19</sup> Information provided by Louis Paul Boon's son, Jo Boon, 28 September 2012.

- <sup>20</sup> See *Belgische Radio en Televisie: handboek*.
- <sup>21</sup> Information provided by Louis Paul Boon's son, Jo Boon, 28 September 2012.
- <sup>22</sup> See also Boon's column in *Vooruit*, 'De vier hoeken van de wereld' [The four corners of the world]; in this column Boon regularly commented on new technologies and the utopian fantasies they triggered, the futures they seemed to make possible.
- <sup>23</sup> See on the TV show the information provided by the Internet Movie Database (IMDB). The list of credited persons enrolled in the show: Louis Paul Boon, Gaston Durnez, Nora Snijers [sic], Piet Theys, Piet van Aken en Paul van de Velde, who hosted the show as a so-called quiz master. Herman Verelst was the show's production manager. See online <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0296468/> [visited August 2012].
- <sup>24</sup> For a rare recording of the programme 't Is maar een woord (BRT) broadcasted on Dutch TV on 15 November 1964, see on YouTube: Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yNExWF3pic>. Part 2: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MncbbuE\\_k8&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MncbbuE_k8&feature=relmfu). Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABTNhvLJKhs&feature=relmfu>.
- <sup>25</sup> Hellemans, 'De castratie van Louis Paul Boon'.
- <sup>26</sup> See the recordings referred to here; see also comments by Leo Pleysier (cited here) and others on his voice and appearance.
- <sup>27</sup> Cited in Hellemans, 'De castratie van Louis Paul Boon'.
- <sup>28</sup> In the Netherlands, comparable language quizzes on television had writers such as Godfried Bomans and Annie M. G. Schmidt in their panels; they were popular before they appeared on prime time television and even more so after; moreover, they were known for their light and entertaining writing and speaking style. In the 1960s, Bomans was the comic star in the programme *Hou je aan je woord* [Stick to your promise]. Other members in the panel were the writers Harry Mulisch, Hella Haasse, Victor E. van Vriesland, and Karel Jonckheere.
- <sup>29</sup> For a reflection on Boon as a 'writer-journalist' in the 1960s, combining a career as a journalist with a career as a literary author an innovator of the novel, see the article by A. van den Oever and E. Bruisnma, in *Witnessing the 60s*, ed. by Ilja van den Broek, Marcel Broersma, and Frank Harbers (forthcoming).
- <sup>30</sup> Boon first appeared on radio on 7 September 1945; he appeared on radio regularly for some years. On 16 September 1955, he appeared on public television for the first time. From 1961 onwards, he appeared on television and radio very regularly. For an overview of his appearances, see: Verdoodt, *Het zoutvaatje van Boontje*, pp. 121–133.
- <sup>31</sup> Boon, *Album Louis Paul Boon*, p. 296.
- <sup>32</sup> See VRT online: <http://www.vrt.be/nieuws/2012/03/hulde-aan-louis-paul-boon>
- <sup>33</sup> More information on <http://programma.ntr.nl/238/NTR/detail/aflevering/6000001507/Godfried%20Bomans> [consulted April 2012]. 'Toen Godfried stierf, hadden mensen het gevoel dat ze een huisvriend hadden verloren.' Hiermee verwoordde Harry Mulisch de schok die het plotselinge overlijden van Bomans in Nederland teweeg bracht.' The information online is taken from a documentary made by Coen Verbraak for NPS, and was broadcasted in 2001, 30 years after Bomans' death.
- <sup>34</sup> See Williams, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form*, pp. 77–120.
- <sup>35</sup> See my *Sensitizing the Viewer* on desensitizing the (television) viewer by repetitive viewing.
- <sup>36</sup> See Casetti, 'Communicative Situations'; Casetti, *Communicative Negotiations in Cinema and Television*.
- <sup>37</sup> See Ellis, 'Cinema and Television'. And Ellis, *Visible Fictions*.
- <sup>38</sup> See Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*. See also Van den Oever, 'The Aesthetics and Viewing Regimes of Cinema and Television, and Their Dialectics.'
- <sup>39</sup> Ellis, 'Cinema and Television'.
- <sup>40</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 350.
- <sup>41</sup> Fully detailed information is to be found in Van den Oever, 'The Aesthetics and Viewing Regimes of Cinema and Television, and Their Dialectics.' With thanks to film scholar Steven Willemsen.
- <sup>42</sup> In the 1960s, screens were still small and TV sets were relatively expensive, certainly in Belgium with its more complex, bilingual system, as was already noted here. Note also that expensive wood was used to make fancy and attractive 'cupboards' to go well with the other expensive pieces of furniture in the living room.
- <sup>43</sup> On embodied cognitions of size and scale, see Garbarini and Adenzato, 'At the Root of Embodied Cognition: Cognitive Science Meets Neurophysiology', pp. 102–103.
- <sup>44</sup> See: [http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/second\\_nature](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/second_nature), accessed 7 June 2011.
- <sup>45</sup> See Van den Oever, 'The Aesthetics and Viewing Regimes of Cinema and Television, and Their Dialectics.' See also *Sensitizing the Viewer*. Moreover, see also Lev Manovich on computer 'windows' and the archaeology of the computer screen in 'Towards an Archaeology of the Computer Screen'.
- <sup>46</sup> On media change, see D. Thourburn, and H. Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, 2003.
- <sup>47</sup> Sorlin, 'Television and the Close-Up,' 120.
- <sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the profoundly different viewing attitude the cinema triggered in audiences in the 1950s and 1960s, see the standard work on the so-called 'apparatus' of the cinema as is discussed by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier. Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*.
- <sup>49</sup> Note that 'Boon' was not minimized nor was he turned into a puppet or a cartoon figure, as comic books tend to do (e.g. see Kuifje). This is what mobile screens effectively do today, creating yet another aesthetic and viewing regime that, though highly interesting, cannot be discussed within the limits of this article.

<sup>50</sup> Ellis, 'Cinema and Television', p. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Ellis, 'Cinema and Television', p. 135.

<sup>52</sup> Ellis, 'Cinema and Television', p. 135.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis, 'Cinema and Television', p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, the highly standardized aesthetic make-up and automatized viewing practice helped to facilitate what could be described as a viewing attitude, similar to that of natural, 'real-life' perception. 'Real-life' perception comes close to what Berliner and Cohen label '[a]ctive perception', meaning 'the cognitive and perceptual processes for selecting and encoding stimuli in the physical world.' See: Berliner and Cohen, 'The Illusion of Continuity', p. 47.

<sup>55</sup> Pleysier online: <http://www.cobra.be/cm/cobra/projecten/boon/1.1243387> [consulted April 2012].

<sup>56</sup> Humbeeck, *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka*, p. 199.

<sup>57</sup> For a broader reflection on the phenomenon under discussion, see the studies by McLuhan, Williams and Ellis already mentioned here.

<sup>58</sup> Humbeeck, *Onder de giftige rook van Chipka*, p. 199.

<sup>59</sup> See Fens, 1972, already cited and discussed above.

<sup>60</sup> A striking example of a radical denouncement of his style is provided by one early critic, A. K. Rottiers, who blamed Boon in 1947 for creating a degenerate, 'mumbo-jumbo' piece of work in *My little War*: 'This UNCIVILIZED (unpolished) PROSE is not uplifting literature. It is the bawdy faltering and mumbo-jumbo of those who have broken away from God's mooring, of a wreck among wrecks, in which the breath of the artist can only be felt from afar.' (See: Rottiers, 'Mijn kleine oorlog door L. P. Boon.' Review of *Mijn kleine oorlog* [My little war] by Louis Paul Boon.) Note that from the 1970s onwards, Rottiers' words appeared silly. Ironically Boon was to be widely recognized as an important author worthy of the Nobel Prize, whereas in the meantime the critic Rottiers was long forgotten. See also: De Witte, 'Met de hoge hoed op naar Zweden', pp. 579.

## Notes on contributor

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